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## THE CHARACTER OF JESUS

### A BASIS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE GOSPEL RECORD.

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*Are the Gospels trustworthy?—Some undisputed propositions on the point.—Bearing of the argument from the Character of Jesus as revealed in these Gospels.—How account for this portraiture?—Insufficiency of the legendary theory.—Jesus a real personage.—The writers divinely guided.—The miracles not fictitious.—Power of the Gospel accounted for.*

PROFESSOR HUXLEY not long ago made this assertion, “From the narratives of Herodotus to those set forth in yesterday’s *Times*, all history is to be read subject to the warning that fiction has its share therein.” This dictum may be fairly stated thus, “No detailed narrative, oral or written, is to be accepted as perfectly accurate.” This is doubtless true respecting every narrative coming from ordinary human sources. Is it also true respecting the gospels of the New Testament? Many a Christian pastor and teacher has good reason to know that among those under his instruction there are some at least, who, though they may never have read Mr. Huxley’s writings, are troubled with doubts respecting the ground of their confidence in the New Testament records concerning Jesus, and whose power for service is weakened by these doubts. Is it possible to point out a pathway by which those who are thus befogged may rise above the fog into the clear atmosphere of intelligent faith?

That we may proceed with sure step there must be found as the basis of our inquiry some propositions which are granted as practically undisputed. This is necessary alike in physical and in religious science. In the present case this is not difficult to do. All scholarship that we need to take seriously into account accepts (1) the Pauline authorship of at least the epistles to the Romans, and to the Corinthians, and to the Galatians, and of course their existence as early as the latter part of the first century; (2) the existence of Christian churches in many cities

of the Roman empire before the close of the first century ; (3) the existence of the four gospels, substantially as they now exist, as early certainly as the latter half of the second century. To these we may add (4) a fourth, which however the inquirer need not take wholly on authority, because he is competent to form an independent opinion, viz., that the man Christ Jesus, who is the chief character presented in the four gospels, was a real historical person and that, whether he was absolutely perfect or not, what Renan affirms is true, "Whatever be the surprises of the future, Jesus will never be surpassed."

Let this fourth proposition be our starting point. For it is not merely the unanimous verdict of all competent and scholarly critics ; any person of average intelligence may satisfy himself of its correctness by a careful and candid reading of the narratives of the four evangelists. To do this it will not be necessary for the student to accept the opinion of the four evangelists. The verdict of scholars rests not on this, but on the facts narrated, and the self-evidencing character of them all taken together. Indeed the evangelists have scarcely expressed any opinions respecting Jesus ; nor has any of them even attempted a portrait of him. What they have done is to narrate certain sayings and acts of his. Each one tells some things not told by any others, and some things told by one or more of the other three, but each one of these brief memoirs is fragmentary, and when put together, however skillfully, they fail to furnish us anything like a complete biography of him. And yet from the careful reading of these four fragmentary sketches, the scholarship of this age is convinced that the principal personage presented in them was so far superior to any other made known by history, that he cannot be the creation of these narrators—that they could not have invented him—that, in short, he was a real person. Every act recorded of him and every word which he is represented as having spoken has been microscopically scrutinized, and pronounced faultless. The situations in which he was often placed were such as to require the utmost discretion in speech and action, but he is admitted always to have spoken and done the wisest thing on all occasions.

How is this phenomenon to be accounted for—not the existence of this ideal character, but the existence of these unmatched records? How were these four men able, not to paint a perfect portrait,—this they have not done or attempted,—but to furnish in fragments, the factors which combined make up the portrait of the ideal man? We have before us not an extended narrative of a single occurrence, but scores of narratives from four different sources, in each of which the same personage is introduced, and in no one of them is he represented as saying a word or doing an act, that judged even by the standards of the nineteenth century, convicts him of fault or imperfection. We are supposed not to know when or by whom these four fragmentary memoirs were written. Let us, for the moment, assume that they took their present form as late as the middle of the second century, more than a century after the death of the principal actor, and that they were then compiled out of a great mass of legendary and mythical matter that had accumulated during this long, credulous and uncritical period. Now is it conceivable that the traditions which grew up during that long and uncritical period contained nothing discreditable to Jesus—that no hasty or unwise or unkind word was attributed to him—no abuse of the confidence which he had inspired—no exercise of the wonderful power which he is represented as possessing for unrighteous or selfish purposes, or even for his own protection or to confound and triumph over his enemies—no vindictive act or angry word called forth by the persistent provocations of his enemies—no utterances in conflict with each other? Consider how slight a thing would have been sufficient to betray imperfection in him, and then say whether it is conceivable that when these compilers a century and more after the death of Jesus, came to write their memoirs out of a collection of myths and legends, they found in all this crude material nothing attributed to him that marred the symmetry or sullied the purity of his character? Surely no intelligent person will set up such a claim. Well then, if, as we cannot but believe, they found all sorts of faults and imperfections attributed to him in these legends, with what kind of a sieve did they separate the chaff from the wheat—the rubbish

and the dross from the pure gold, so perfectly ? Were they men of such remarkable critical powers as to be able, as by intuition, to distinguish between the gold of truth and the rubbish of tradition ? This would be to set up a claim for these four obscure and ordinary men such as it would be the extreme of arrogance for any historical scholar to set up for himself.

Shall we then abandon the mythical and legendary theory, and grant that the evangelists were personal witnesses of what they each narrate, or at least received it from eyewitnesses ? This may go a long way towards accounting for the phenomenon presented by these unique memoirs, but if the dictum be true that "narratives in yesterday's *Times* have their share of fiction," how does it happen that the "fiction" in the narratives of the evangelists never obscures the brightness of the perfect ideal presented in Jesus ?

To this it may be answered that if the fiction were accepted as fact it would mar the ideal, and we should no longer regard Jesus as faultless, and that just because we believe Jesus to have been faultless we regard as fictitious whatever in the narratives of the evangelists would mar his faultlessness.

Let us submit this answer to the test of examination. It is the miracles attributed by the evangelists to Jesus to which objection is chiefly made by those who regard the gospels as partly fictitious. Expurgate from the gospels all that claims to be miraculous and you omit everything that indicates sympathy and pity for suffering and want on the part of Jesus. There is no record that he ever gave a penny of money in charity, though beggars abounded in Palestine, or that he ever clothed the naked, or fed the hungry except on the two occasions when he did it by miracle. The record of his miracles if accepted as true, proves him to have been full of compassion and tenderness toward the needy and suffering, but if rejected, leaves us without proof that he ever did a charitable deed. Silver and gold he had none, but such as he had—divine power to relieve suffering and assuage sorrow, he gave freely and abundantly. Expurgate all accounts of miracles and you take away the natural occasion for much of his teaching, and make the accounts seem unnatural and improb-

able. And, what is more, you rob the gospels of the richest instruction contained in them, for the record of his miracles is more full of instruction than even the parables. They were object-less-sons equally with the parables rich in truth, and more impressive.

The objection to the reality of Christ's miracles may be stated thus: "You do not believe the stories of miracles which you find in Livy or Herodotus. Why then should you believe those which you find in the narratives of the evangelists?" The reply to this is: If Livy or Herodotus had given us such a personality in all respects as the evangelists have given us in Jesus, equal to him in moral perfection and greatness, and had ascribed to him such a mission as the evangelists ascribe to Jesus, and had represented him as performing, in attestation of his mission, miracles which in their character, as acts of compassion and kindness, as evidences of the possession of supernatural power, and so of a divine mission, would bear comparison with the miracles of Jesus, while at the same they embodied the most precious and vital truths—if, I say, Livy or Herodotus had done this, we might well accept as truthful their stories of miracles. But it is safe to say that neither they nor any other historians, outside the Christian Scriptures, have done this nor anything approaching it. If Jesus was, as Renan asserts, a man who surpassed all that had preceded him, and who will never be surpassed, his appearance in a nation and age and in social surroundings such as existed when he lived, is itself a miracle. No natural cause or set of causes could have produced him. He is so manifestly supernatural that we cannot but expect him to do supernatural things. He is so manifestly supernatural that we expect him to announce a supernatural mission, and our expectation is confirmed when he tells us that he came from heaven to save the world.

If it be said that though the evangelists could not have invented Jesus, they could have invented the stories of the miracles, and so, though we cannot but believe that Jesus was the perfect man they represent him, we are not obliged to believe that he performed the miracles they attribute to him, this must be denied. For in truth the miracles were as much beyond the power of the evangelists to invent as was Jesus him-

self,—and it is unreasonable to believe that they could have sifted out of the material from which they compiled their gospels everything that would have marred the symmetry and purity of Christ's character, and yet have admitted a camel-load of extravagant and incredible stories under the name of miracles, if they were in fact mere inventions.

Let any candid doubter, of average intelligence, take the record of Christ's miracles and study it in the order of their occurrence, as nearly as that can be ascertained, note how naturally they fit into the time and place and occasion that called them forth, observe the benevolent purpose of them all, the absence of design to excite mere wonder, to minister to his own convenience or comfort, or to inflict harm upon, or win a triumph over, his enemies; observe how they gradually reveal his lordship over nature and the world of matter and mind; and finally follow them in order and see how complete is the system of instruction they furnish for his disciples whom he was training to be the heralds of his gospel to the world; and he cannot but be convinced that no human intellect was competent to invent a set of stories like these,—that, in short, as Jesus must have been a real person because the evangelists were not competent to invent him, so the accounts these same evangelists have given of the miracles must be true because they never could have invented them. De Quincy has said: "The evangelists could no more have invented the parables than a man, alleging a diamond mine, could invent a diamond in attestation. The parables prove themselves." With greater confidence may it be affirmed that the miracles prove themselves. The evangelists could no more have invented them than a scientist could invent a sunset. As the verdict of the scholarship of the age is that no such record of a life as that of Jesus could have been made if it had not been lived, so no such record of miracles could have been made if they had not first been performed.

To sum up what has been presented above: (1) A study of the records of the evangelists such as any honest inquirer might pursue under the guidance of an intelligent pastor or teacher would result in an intelligent conviction that Jesus was a real person

and the most perfect man of the human race. (2) This conviction would be accompanied by another, that the men whose narratives give us this representation of the person of Jesus must, in some way, have been gifted with rare critical power, and are worthy of belief when they represent Jesus as promising his disciples that the Holy Spirit should guide them into all the truth and bring to their remembrance what he had said unto them, and so that the early church were not uncritical when they accepted the records made by the evangelists as divinely inspired. (3) If then the accounts of Christ's miracles be carefully studied, the result cannot fail to be a firm conviction that they are as unlike any records of pretended miracles as Christ is unlike any other man, and so that neither Jesus nor the miracles can be human inventions. (4) He will thus be furnished with a rational explanation of the fact, which Paul's acknowledged epistles show, that the great facts and doctrines of Christianity were well known and believed by Christian converts in Rome and Corinth and Galatia, not more than thirty years after the death of Christ. Thus the sincere inquirer, accepting on authority what all competent authorities agree in accepting, can by steps possible for any person of average intelligence, reach the firm conviction that the four gospels were written by men so endowed, either by nature or by the Holy Spirit, that they did not mistake myths and legends for facts. Here he can stand on firm ground. He has positive knowledge which his ignorance of many other things does not affect. The questions on which the doctors still disagree he can hold in abeyance till they come to an agreement. Any real scholar will tell him that the higher criticism has not yet spoken its last word, and it is quite possible that its last word will set aside many of its former words.

The scholarship of the world, after eighteen centuries is agreed in placing the crown of humanity on the head of Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Jewish ecclesiastical power and the Roman civil power united in putting to death as a perverter of the people. The time may come when, in spite of Professor Huxley's dictum, the scholarship of the world will be agreed in the belief that there is one narrative in which there is no mixture of fiction.